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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Wow, the holidays are only a few days away - another year almost gone! It seems just like a few weeks ago that I was cleaning off my golf clubs to get ready for another season of play! And now I can look out the window and watch the early beginning of a snowstorm that might dump up to a foot of snow overnight! And this is after a couple of inches of snow and then rain earlier in the week. I guess whether I'm ready for it or not, it's here to stay for awhile!

So, we're not ready for the holidays just yet, with all that has been going on around here. Maybe by the weekend, we can finish up, but I'm not too hopeful. It's been a rough year, to say the least.

On a semi-positive note, after a couple of days of touch-and-go conditions, our dog Butkus is getting a little better. We took him in for surgery on Tuesday, and he tolerated that very well. However, some complications and other medical issues were causing him to not improve. He had to be put on a ventilator and be getting constant oxygen. He had a lung removed and was having trouble adjusting to decreased air capacity. It wasn't looking too good, and the doctors were very concerned. Of course this didn't do much for us either, thinking that having him get the surgery was going to help him overall. But day by day, he was making small improvements, and the doctors were getting a bit more optimistic. For the first time since we brought him in, we were allowed to visit with him. We decided that we need him to see us, as well as us him. So, we decided to try and beat the snow that was rapidly approaching and visit with him. He looked better than we had anticipated, but he had intravenous tubes connected, a catheter, and oxygen. And, something that he truly hates, one of those plastic head cones to prevent him from licking at his sutures. Most of his right side has been shaved, as well. He was semi-sedated with painkiller when we got there, but he perked up a little when he saw us - a good sign. We even managed to get a few tail wags! We couldn't stay too long because we were concerned that he'd get too excited. So I think that the visit helped him. We're hoping that he'll be able to be weaned off of the oxygen soon so we can bring him home over the next few days. It would be nice to have him back with us where he belongs!

So, while we're hoping for a family reunion for our biggest holiday gift, we here at A-ONE wish you all a very happy holiday season.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well...

T’is the week before Christmas, and all through the land,
Our finances are crumbling, ’neath the FED’s palsy’d hand.
Our banks are all cautious ’bout giving out loans.
And Fanny and Freddy, are now nothing but bones.

Wall Street and Main Street, what a nifty catch-phrase!
But the fat cats still get rich, regardless of praise!
The jets all sit silent, but ready to go
To some far away island where extradition is slow.

On Ford, on Chrysler, and on GM too!
You’ve screwed yourselves proper, but we’ve got a bail-out for you!
You threatened bankruptcy or at least you were hintin’,
And the republicans, in denial, are saying, "Yeah, but that Clinton..."

Sorry folks. I just couldn’t resist. Sometimes ya just gotta let your true colors show, y’know what I mean? [evil grin]

Anyway, this IS the last issue you’ll read before Christmas, and all of us here want to wish you a happy, healthy holiday season. No matter what your beliefs, please accept our wishes for a safe and joyous holiday and a happy and healthy new year.

I’m not going to hammer at anyone about donating food or money to shelters and/or soup kitchens... you already know all that stuff. I remember the night Harry Chapin dope-smacked me for five or ten minutes (but it felt like hours) about getting complacent and self-satisfied with donating a little bit here and there.... almost 30 years have passed, and I can still picture him, animated as all hell, joking and laughing but with a hard-as-nails surface behind it. He lived what he taught... "One for me, one for the other guy" was his motto, and he did it because he felt he should... half his salary went to charity... We lost a one-of-a-kind when he died, but his legacy lives on.

I’m not going to butt-kick you like Chapin did me, but I WOULD like to ask you to donate a little something to the local homeless shelter or food-share. You can’t change the world, and I’m not asking you to try... I’m asking you to change YOU... just a little bit. Give a couple of bucks, a bag of stuffing or can of green beans or cranberry sauce. Just do it. Just pick up a couple extra things when you go shopping and drop ’em off where they’ll do some good. Let your kids see you do it... hell, let them help you help someone else.

Okay, enough of that... if you’re going to do it, you’re going to do it, and nothing I can say will MAKE you donate if you’re NOT inclined to. But at least think about it.

The other thing I want to mention is that we’d like you to be very

careful about drinking and driving. That’s a big no-no. We all know that. Do the designated driver thing, do the taxi thing (another Harry Chapin reference), or do the "here, take my keys" thing. Whatever you do, be responsible. Remember: The life you save may be MINE! [grin]

Okay, on with the news, hints, tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

On the subject of CTPCI news, last week Rodolphe Czuba posted:

"INFO : it will be possible to cut the PCI slots board to use only 3 or 2 slots. It will be possible too to cut for only 1 slot BUT you will need to solder a big wire between CT60/63 & the PCI slot to furnish the +3.3V.

Some modifications on the CTPCI and the ATX tower drilling draft is available in the technics area :
http://www.czuba-tech.com/CTPCI/english/welcome.htm "

Edward Baiz replies:

"To me, the more the merrier. I would not want to delete any of the slots. I had four slots on my Hades and that was not enough. I would have loved to have more."

Jean-Francois Lemaire asks Edward:

"Out of curiosity: what did you have in them? I had no idea there even was a many as 4 PCI cards available for Atari hardware."

Jo Even Skarstein jumps in and tells Jean-Francois:

"I can’t say what Edward had in his Hades, but in my Milan I have a graphics card, two network cards and a PCI Soundblaster. I also have a SCSI card and a TV card I’m not using."

Last week Phantomm said:

"I’ve a few projects that I’ve been working on, and after going thru some boxes, I have located my fairly large Atari software collection. A lot of Atari ST/E related software on disks already in the .ST file format. Many of these programs especially the games have been cracked and have nice demos, intros and etc that run before the games loads up or at the title screen.

A lot of effort went into doing these and I must have several thousand files in the .ST format. (I’ve collected this stuff for years)
Is there enough interest in these files for me to create a few CDs and make available? Or should I just leave them in the boxes?
Many are games, but also have a lot of apps/utilities/fonts/text files and etc. These are from the 80s and early 90s."

Edward Baiz tells Phantomm:

"I possibly would be interested. Can you provide a partial list of the programs that are on the disks?"

Phantomm replies:

"Not at the moment, sorry. But, a lot of it I have not seen anywhere else. Not saying that someone doesn't have it, but there is some really interesting software and etc. A lot of the files are in .MSA format too.

In the games, what I find interesting besides the games themselves, are the built in cheat modes, and demos/music.

If I have to test every .MSA file, by making a working ST disk, then it's really going to take some time. I've already made a shoebox full of games from .MSA files and haven't really made a dent into it.

These all worked on my 1040STE, except for a few which I suspect will only work on a ST/STFM.

To speed it up, I'll have to just copy them over to CD/DVD make a list and get someone to help check the files before a final release if it comes to that.

Also there seems to be a ton of Music related software."

'Charlie' takes the opportunity to ask for something he's been looking for:

"I need a program called st control.......released by Trio Engineering.. do you have this program?"

Phantomm asks Charlie:

"Sounds familiar to me...not sure at the moment, I'd have to do some searching
for it. I'm guessing that its some type of application? Can you tell me about what year it was made and if it was a commercial release? Also, what is it supposed to do?"

Well folks, that's it for this week. I know it's short, but there weren't that many messages in the NewsGroup. Like I said before, have a happy, healthy and safe holiday, and come on back next week... we need all the readers we can get!

Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Is the PlayStation 3 Dying?
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" PSP 4000 in Late 2009?
Nintendo Settles Nyko Suit!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Is the PlayStation 3 Dying?

Fallout from the November sales data continues to mount for Sony and its PlayStation family. CNNMoney's Silicon Alley Insider column pulled no punches in its assessment of the numbers calling the PS3 "A sinking ship" in light of its sales declining 19 percent compared to what it did last year. While that's a bit melodramatic, it's hard to argue with their conclusion that the PS3 needs a price cut soon, and a substantive one at that. Ten year lifespan or not, it stands on the brink of falling behind the Xbox 360 by an insurmountable margin.

The article attributes the PS3's struggles to three key reasons: its higher price tag, no one caring that it plays Blu-Ray, and the lack of system selling software. Acknowledging the price issue, the other two fall into a much more gray area. Blu-Ray shows more signs of life with each month that passes since it won the HD format war. Netflix announced at the beginning of December that it had seen a dramatic rise in Blu-ray renters, hitting its year-end target over a month early, and that's in spite of an extra fee they added for the format. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment president David Bishop also said in a recent interview with Home Media Magazine that Blu-ray sales are growing at a rate of 200 to 300 percent over last year's figures.

Admittedly, the question of whether the PS3 has a library of must-have titles is more subjective. But dismissing Metal Gear Solid 4, LittleBIGPlanet, Resistance 1 and 2, and Uncharted alone is a little hard to swallow. Regardless, there's no denying either the momentum the Xbox 360 continues to enjoy in this head-to-head rivalry or the gargantuan sales the Wii racks up. Whatever the short-term accounting implications, the signs increasingly indicate that Sony can not afford to watch $400 PS3s sitting on shelves much longer.

PSP 4000 in Late 2009, PSP2 Arriving Later

With 2008 on its merry way out, "publishing sources" have leaked news of a PlayStation Portable update next year to Eurogamer.

The PSP 4000, a final refresh model, will appear in late 2009, say these

sources, followed by an official successor to the PSP at a later point. Make that 2011 or 2012, then, to speculate logically (and perhaps to coincide with the rumored release timeframe of Sony's PS4?).

If Sony follows precedent, bet on "PSP2" as the eventual successor's moniker.

I reviewed the last refresh, the PSP 3000, when it snuck without much ado onto shelves in mid-October. The changes were nominal, and the only two of any functional distinction were a new inbuilt mic and a brighter, more color-expansive LCD.

Unfortunately, that new LCD exchanged earlier models' "ghosting" problems for an irritating new one: /interlacing/. Move the viewpoint around in a 3D game on the PSP 3000, and faint black lines appear, horizontally stacked up and down the screen. It's like someone pulled a hundred-tine rake across the video feed, and once you've noticed it, it's nearly impossible *not* to.

A PSP 4000 would ostensibly remedy the PSP 3000's interlacing gaffe, though anything else is conjecture. A minor weight drop? Further ergonomic tinkering? I wouldn't expect much. Companies like to save their superstar features for full-family shifts, which is why some of the most head-slappingly obvious and programmatically superficial improvements in current iterations of Windows or OS X will never see light of day by way of prior version service releases.

Developers are reportedly already at work on games for the PSP's successor, says Eurogamer, which at best means they're testing computer simulations, and at worst, that someone's yanking the usual chains.

Long overdue feature request for the PSP-whatever-it's-eventually-called: Dual analog thumbsticks, please.

Nintendo Settles Lawsuit with Nyko

Nintendo of America Inc. and Nyko Technologies Inc. said Wednesday they have settled a lawsuit over the nunchuk controller used for the popular Wii gaming console.

Terms weren't disclosed.

Nintendo of America, based in Redmond, Wash., had sued Los Angeles-based video-game accessory maker Nyko, alleging violation of its intellectual property rights.

The nunchuk attaches to the Wii's wireless controller for games like boxing, where players need to hold the controller in both hands.

Under the agreement, Nyko will continue to sell a redesigned version of its Kama wireless controller, the companies said.

Does Gaming at Work Improve Productivity?

In many offices, approved gaming in the workplace is limited to the receptionist’s engagement in rounds of Minesweeper or Solitaire when the phone isn’t ringing. Admins may sneak off to Pogo during lunch, and the IT guys may stick around after hours for a game of Counter-Strike, but by and large video games have been no more a part of the typical company’s culture than pinochle.

Things are slowly changing, however. A number of companies have found that using video games as a way to reward employees for reaching their goals or increasing their productivity can improve office productivity and morale. During the current economic downturn, rewards for overworked employees can be especially welcome.

Another practice whose popularity is growing is the use of video games as training tools. Numerous public safety and military organizations use video games to simulate field conditions. (For example, the battle simulator America’s Army, developed by the U.S. Army, has become an enormously successful recruiting tool for the military.) But you don’t have to shoot Nazis to find value for games in the workplace: A company called Executive Command uses the strategy game Empire Earth II to teach managers how to improve their strategic thinking and work as part of a team.

At Regence Blue Cross/Blue Shield in Portland, Oregon, IT department members earn virtual "tokens" for performing certain activities: Resetting a user’s password is worth 2 tokens. Implementing a cost-saving idea earns 30 tokens. Employees can then "spend" these tokens to play quick, chance-based video games. The games are more akin to slot machines: Tokens are converted into points, which can be redeemed for prizes, including cash.

The gaming-at-work approach is the brainchild of Snowfly, a company that provides technology-based employee incentives. According to Snowfly, the arrangement increases motivation and productivity as workers compete to earn tokens and prizes. The company claims that the system has a 95 percent approval rate among users. Businesses currently using the system range from a Wyoming bank to a beverage distributor.

Some employers faced with special situations actively encourage gaming on the job. For example, Monterey Bay Area paramedics who work long overnight shifts have management’s blessing to play casual games like Bejeweled on their PDAs during downtime so they don’t fall asleep. But even in corporate office environments, which have long resisted any mingling of work and play, the taboos are beginning to fall.

In some organizations, gaming has become a part of corporate culture, and virtually everyone participates. At the Computing Technology Industry Association, or CompTIA, president and CEO Todd Thibodeaux gets in on the action, too. His 158 employees regularly commandeer conference rooms outfitted with various console games, to shoot a few holes of Tiger Woods for the Wii or to take in a quick game of Forza 2 or Stardust on the PS3.

Back in their cubicles, members of rival CompTIA departments regularly engage in PC-based multiplayer games, trash-talking over the walls. The company also maintains a "lending library" of high-tech products, including game consoles and software titles, that staffers can take home. Thibodeaux says that the Wii typically is booked for months in advance.

Though the company has no formal policy on gaming, Thibodeaux says that it tends to work itself out, and he actively encourages game playing. "Salaried employees know that their work day is what they need it to be," he says, "and if they need to squeeze in 15 to 20 minutes of leisure time here or there, they know they can make it up later."

In Thibodeaux's view, his company's gaming policy (or nonpolicy) has "no downsides." He offers myriad reasons why it works: It's an amazing team-building mechanism, particularly when people from around the company gather around a console in a single room. Also, "stress relief really increases productivity, especially at busy times of the year." It even helps with recruiting, he says, because most other companies don't encourage their employees to play games at work. Perhaps most important, says Thibodeaux, the policy has never been abused.

Lee Burbage, "internal community chieftan" (sort of like HR director) for the Web site Motley Fool, offers a similar story. The 200-employee company has a fully outfitted game room, with consoles and even arcade games (Robotron is phenomenally popular). Here, matches of Halo keep staff coming back to frag. Like CompTIA, Motley Fool has no precise policy on use of the facilities (the company has a "take what you need" vacation policy, too), and employees can play whenever they want. It's all part of Motley Fool's culture of "trust and individual responsibility."

Burbage firmly believes that gaming helps the staff. The most obvious reason: "People need a break. Studies show that if you just sit at your desk all day, productivity goes down and down." He says that gaming also teaches how to think strategically, several moves ahead, and of course it helps with team building, "And hey, it's fun," adds Burbage. "After I go play Halo, I come back and I'm happy and in a good mood."

Though he can't attribute the phenomenon entirely to gaming, Burbage says that the company's culture has helped keep employee turnover at a minuscule 4 percent per year.

That leaves us with just one question: Which department produces the best gamers? Thibodeaux says that his sales department is big into shooters (draw your own conclusions on that one), but all sources seem to agree on one piece of advice: No matter what game you're playing, never go up against the IT department.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Critical IE 7 Exploit Making The Rounds

Microsoft issued a critical security warning Tuesday that a malicious exploit is making the rounds and attacking vulnerabilities in Internet Explorer 7.

The risk is believed to be widespread, given that IE 7 is the latest version of Microsoft's browser and is bundled with XP service pack 3 and also Vista, said Dave Marcus, director of security research and communications for McAfee's Avert Labs.

The AZN Trojan, which has been making the rounds since the first week of December, has the potential of infecting users' system with a Trojan horse, or "downloaders" that can download other forms of malware onto a user's system.

Microsoft announced it will release a security patch Wednesday via its automatic update system to patch users computers.

Users can potentially get infected two ways, Marcus said. One is to visit a malicious Web site that already has the malware installed on the site, or visit a legitimate site, in which the attacker has inserted the malicious script to run in the background, leaving visitors unaware their systems have been compromised. "A lot of Web sites are pushing out this exploit," Marcus noted. Some of the infected sites include Web sites that offer free wallpaper for mobile phones to sites that feature property to product-related sites.

Microsoft is encouraging users to update their systems once the patch is released Wednesday at 10 a.m. PDT.

Apple Fixes Issues in Mac OS X Leopard and Tiger

Apple has been busy fixing several glitches for users of both its Mac OS X Tiger and Mac OS X Leopard.

On Monday Apple released a slew of fixes - 36 to be exact - for Mac OS X Leopard in its 10.5.6 update that fixes problems with iChat, MobileMe, and Safari. On Tuesday, the Cupertino-based company released Security Update 2008-008 for Mac OS X Tiger 10.4.11 users.

The update for Mac OS X Leopard 10.5 to 10.5.5 addresses several issues with iChat, including no longer logging users out of iChat when setting the iChat status to invisible, and it resolves an issue with pasting text from Microsoft Office.

Mail also received a list of fixes, including improving its overall performance, improving the accuracy of Connection Doctor, and taking junk mail out of the inbox. The update also addressed the issue of Mail quitting, the reliability of printing PDF attachments, and the issue which caused Mail to append a character to the file extension of an attachment.

For MobileMe, the fix was simple: Sync contacts, calendars and bookmarks on a Mac automatically and within a minute of the changes being made on a computer, a mobile device, or via the Web at me.com.

Apple had several fixes for parental controls, including an issue which prevented the addition of allowed Web sites from Safari via drag and drop. The update also fixed time limits and addressed an issue in which parent-controlled accounts were not able to access iTunes.

For its Time Machine backup utility, the fixes were simple: Improve reliability with Time Capsule and fix issues that could cause Time Machine to show that a backup volume could not be found.

For gamers, the update solves problems with graphics. It includes general improvements for the performance of games; graphics improvements for iChat, Cover Flow, Aperture and iTunes; and fixes distortion issues with ATI graphics cards.

While Apple aimed to improve performance with its 10.5.6 update, it is also concerned about security breeches and Security Update 2008-008 corrects issues with CoreGraphics, CoreServices, Adobe's Flash Player plug-in, Libsystem, Internet sharing, and ISO files.

Fixes will prevent unexpected system shutdowns when a user has opened a malicious ISO file. The update also addresses an issue with memory corruption in Libsystem's startup time API. The update provides improved memory.

There are multiple issues that exist in the Flash Player plug-in, according to Apple. The most serious issues could lead to downloading malicious code when visiting a Web site. Apple tackles this problem by updating the plug-in to version 9.0.151.0.

The system updates can be downloaded as an automatic update or in a stand-alone installer.

Firefox Issues Eight Patches for Web Browser

Mozilla has issued eight patches for its Firefox Web browser, three of which fix problems classified as critical.

The patches come after security experts have recommended using a browser other than Microsoft's Internet Explorer 7 and older versions of IE due to a dangerous vulnerability. Microsoft is due to release an emergency patch for that problem Wednesday.

Two of the critical Firefox problems could allow an attacker execute a cross-site scripting attack, in which scripts or commands from one Web application that shouldn't run in another are successfully executed. The third problem relates to Firefox's browser engine, and could make it crash or possibly allow someone to remotely execute code on a PC, Mozilla said in its advisory.

Mozilla defines a critical vulnerability as one that could allow an attacker to run code on a machine in the course of normal Web browsing.

The patches are for Firefox version numbers 3.04 and 2.0.0.18. Mozilla has said this round of patches will be the last for Firefox 2, which it will now stop supporting. The update also removes the phishing filter in Firefox 2 because the browser uses an outdated version of a protocol used to import a blocklist of phishing sites supplied by Google. Firefox 2 users are being promoted to upgrade to Firefox 3.

Firefox's auto-update mechanism should automatically download these latest patches, and users will be prompted to restart the browser to complete the process.

NY Proposes Applying Sales Tax to Digital Goods

Rumors of the fabled "iPod tax" swirled again Tuesday when a budget plan unveiled by New York Gov. David Paterson included provisions that would impose a sales tax on digital downloads.

The plan also includes a tax on television and radio services provided by cable and satellite, and says that e-commerce sites like Amazon cannot claim tax exemption for online purchases if they have affiliates located in the state.

Paterson, a Democrat, proposes closing a digital property taxation loophole by imposing state and local sales tax on the purchase of pre-written software, digital audio, audio-visual and text files, digital photographs, games, and other electronic entertainment.

"With the passage of this bill, a book, song, album, or movie would be subject to sales tax no matter if it was bought at a brick and mortar store or downloaded online," according to the plan.

"Change is never easy, but it is the only way we can put New York back on the road toward fiscal and economic recovery," Paterson said in a statement." There is no doubting the seriousness of the problems we must address and the need to deal with them in a direct and candid manner."

If the provision is successful, residents of New York would no longer be able to purchase songs from online music retailers like iTunes, Amazon.com, or Walmart.com without incurring a sales tax.

Paterson also proposes taxing cable and satellite service, which is in place in 23 other states.

The budget would also require online retailers without a physical presence in New York but who deal with its citizens to set up a "nexus" in the state for tax purposes.

In May, Amazon.com sued the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance after New York lawmakers approved a budget package that included a bill that would force online stores like Amazon.com to collect sales tax.

Amazon argued that since it did not have a physical presence in New York, it should not have to pay taxes. New York argued, however, that since participants in Amazon’s affiliate program - which allows people to earn money when they include Amazon links on their personal Web sites or blogs - live in New York, Amazon does have a presence in the state.

Under Paterson’s proposal, a company would create a "nexus" in the state if any of their affiliates live in New York. This "prevents a company from avoiding charging sales and use tax on Internet purchases by creating independent but affiliated out-of-state entities to make those sales," according to the proposal.

Also included in Paterson’s plan is a $10 fee for filing a paper personal income tax return, in an effort to encourage Internet-based filings.

Yahoo Slashes Data Retention to Three Months

In a move to one-up its search-engine rivals, Yahoo on Wednesday announced a new global data-retention policy that far surpasses what Google and Microsoft have proposed.

Indeed, Yahoo is setting the industry standard for data retention with its promise to anonymize user log data within 90 days -- with limited exceptions for fraud, security and legal obligations. Yahoo is also expanding its policy to apply not only to search-log data but also page views, page clicks, ad views, and ad clicks.

"In our world of customized online services, responsible use of data is critical to establishing and maintaining user trust," said Anne Toth, Yahoo's vice president of policy. "We know that our users expect relevant and compelling content and advertising when they visit Yahoo, but they also want assurances that we are focused on protecting their privacy."

Privacy advocates, including European Union regulators, have put pressure on search engines to slash data-storage times. The current industry standard is 18 months. Microsoft last week told European regulators it's ready to cut the time it holds users' search data from 18 months to six months - if other search-engine companies do the same.

"What we've done since April is evaluate the multiple uses of search data to ascertain if we can, in time, move to a six-month time frame," said Peter Cullen, Microsoft's chief privacy strategist. "Our answer is yes, we can, but we don't believe it makes sense for us to make this change until our competitors also commit to meeting this higher standard with respect to both the method and time frame for anonymization."

Yahoo isn't waiting for other search engines to cooperate. Instead, the heads of the business and engineering units at Yahoo worked with the privacy and data-governance teams to review data needs. Their goal was to ensure that Yahoo retains data only long enough to serve its business and user-experience needs while maintaining the ability to fight fraud, secure systems, and meet legal obligations.

"This policy represents Yahoo's assessment of the minimum amount of time we need to retain data in order to respond to the needs of our business while deepening our trusted relationship with users," Toth said. "We're proud this new policy sets a new benchmark for the industry."

Yahoo said users won't see a difference in their experience with Yahoo products or services, and advertisers will continue to leverage its interest-based advertising systems to deliver the most relevant ads. That revelation begs the question: Do users really care how long search engines retain their search data?

"I question to what extent consumers have any awareness of data-retention issues," said Greg Sterling, principal analyst at Sterling Market Intelligence. "They do have awareness that their behavior is tracked online, and there is considerable discomfort with that, but in terms of specific issues as to how long data is kept, I think there is total ignorance on the part of regular consumers."

Yahoo’s move also begs questions about what Microsoft, Google and others will do in response to this aggressive policy. Sterling said it puts pressure on the search-engine industry to at least shave time off their data-retention policies. The European Union has pushed for a six-month limit.

"We might see Microsoft quickly come out and say it will cut its policy to six months, or maybe match Yahoo," Sterling said. "If that happens, certainly Google will have to follow suit. Google may not come down to three months, but they may come down to six months. If Google were to be isolated in this, it would not only incur the wrath of the EU regulators but it would also suffer in the press as the other two key players stepped up to the requested standard."

Privacy Advocates Question Yahoo’s Data Policy

Yahoo on Wednesday announced a new data-retention policy, but on Thursday privacy experts were still scratching their heads about what the policy really means.

Although it appeared Yahoo was setting an industry standard for data retention with a promise to anonymize user log data within 90 days (with limited exceptions for fraud, security and legal obligations), privacy advocates say the announcement isn’t clear.

"It’s subtle, but it’s important. Yahoo is not slashing its data-retention policy to three months," said Marc Rotenberg, executive director for the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "Yahoo is modifying the data at three months and keeping the data. So the real question is what is happening to the information that these search companies are keeping?"

Yahoo said the heads of its business and engineering units worked with the privacy and data-governance teams to review the company’s data needs. The goal was to ensure that Yahoo retains data only long enough to serve its business and user-experience needs while maintaining the ability to fight fraud, secure systems, and meet legal obligations.

"This policy represents Yahoo’s assessment of the minimum amount of time we need to retain data in order to respond to the needs of our business while deepening our trusted relationship with users," said Anne Toth, Yahoo’s vice president of policy. Yahoo is also expanding its policy to apply not only to search-log data but also page views, page clicks, ad views, and ad clicks.

Rotenberg said he would welcome a retention policy in which data is deleted or destroyed, but that’s not what Yahoo has announced. As a consequence, he said, there’s more confusion about what search-engine companies are doing with the data they collect.

"Just to give an example, the IP address is a unique identifier that more often than not links a search query to an individual user. Yahoo is not even removing the entire IP address. They are knocking out the last few digits," Rotenberg said. "That’s a little like having someone’s phone number and taking the last number off of it. That’s not deletion. It gets very subtle and very complicated."

When a user conducts a search on Yahoo, Google, Microsoft or another search engine, the companies collect a large volume of data. Most users aren’t aware of how much data is collected because it happens behind the scenes.

For example, when a user searches, the engine collects data around the text, which is referred to as the search query. It also saves the date and time stamp, which is when the search occurred down to the second. It records the cookie, which is more accurately called a persistent identifier. It saves the IP address, and there’s also a record locater.

"When the companies say they are deleting or anonymizing, neither of those statements are true. What they are really doing is modifying the data that they are keeping. Then the interesting question is, how are they actually modifying the data? What is being kept? What isn’t being kept?" Rotenberg asked. "And the fairly obvious question is, is it possible to re-identify the person that made the search, because, at least from the privacy perspective, that’s what this is all about."

FCC Cancels Vote on Free Broadband Wireless Plan

A much-publicized meeting by the Federal Communications Commission later this month has been canceled. The meeting’s agenda included a vote on a plan that could have provided free broadband wireless service to underserved areas of the U.S.

The FCC said the meeting for Dec. 18 was canceled following a request from Sens. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) that the agency scale down other efforts in order to concentrate on the switch to digital-television broadcasts in February.

FCC spokesperson Robert Kenny said "it does not appear that there is a consensus to move forward and the agenda meeting has been canceled."

It wasn’t only Democratic legislators pressuring the FCC. The outgoing Bush administration also indicated that it opposed the plan. Last week, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez sent a letter to FCC Chairman Kevin Martin which said, in part, that the administration believes the airwaves "should be auctioned without price or product mandate."

The FCC’s plan would have auctioned off some airwaves and required the winner to offer free wireless Internet access. One version of the plan would have required the winning company to make at least 25 percent of the spectrum available free to most of the nation. Another version would have given free, unlicensed access to some of the spectrum to innovators if the acquiring company didn’t fulfill its promise.

Neither version of the plan was exactly receiving accolades from the cell-phone industry or free-speech advocates. T-Mobile, for instance, argued there would be interference from the free Internet into the adjacent spectrum it licensed. However, FCC engineers have told news media that there would be no significant interference.

Some consumer advocates interested in maintaining free information flow objected to a part of the plan that would have required a filter to remove adult material for under-18 users. Users over 18 could remove the

filter.

Some observers saw the FCC plan as a retread of an earlier plan submitted by M2Z Networks, primarily for use of the 2155-2180-MHz band. The auction was designed for frequencies in the 2.1 GHz Advanced Wireless Services (AWS) spectrum, which includes 2155-2180 MHz.

Backed by technology venture-capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, M2Z has proposed that consumers buy a router that offers free, midrange DSL speeds and then pay for any upgrade to faster transmissions. M2Z's business model includes advertising for the free component.

The cancellation comes shortly after the release of a 110-page report from the House Energy and Commerce Committee's oversight and investigations subcommittee. The report, entitled Deception and Distrust: The Federal Communications Commission under Chairman Kevin J. Martin, charged that Martin changed and withheld data and reports in order to bolster his particular positions, and that he presided over a demoralized and dysfunctional agency.

U.S. Not Ready for Cyber Attack

The United States is unprepared for a major hostile attack against vital computer networks, government and industry officials said on Thursday after participating in a two-day "cyberwar" simulation.

The game involved 230 representatives of government defense and security agencies, private companies and civil groups. It revealed flaws in leadership, planning, communications and other issues, participants said.

The exercise comes almost a year after President George W. Bush launched a cybersecurity initiative which officials said has helped shore up U.S. computer defenses but still falls short.

"There isn't a response or a game plan," said senior vice president Mark Gerencser of the Booz Allen Hamilton consulting service, which ran the simulation. "There isn't really anybody in charge," he told reporters afterward.

Democratic U.S. Rep. James Langevin of Rhode Island, who chairs the homeland security subcommittee on cybersecurity, said: "We're way behind where we need to be now."

Dire consequences of a successful attack could include failure of banking or national electrical systems, he said.

"This is equivalent in my mind to before September 11 ... we were awakened to the threat on the morning after September 11."

Officials cited attacks by Russia sympathizers on Estonia and Georgia as examples of modern cyberwarfare, and said U.S. businesses and government offices have faced intrusions and attacks.

Billions of dollars must be spent by both government and industry to improve security, said U.S. Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger of Maryland, the Democratic chairman of the intelligence subcommittee on technical

intelligence.

The war game simulated a dramatic surge in computer attacks at a time of economic vulnerability, and required participants to find ways to mitigate the attacks - using real-life knowledge of tactics and procedures where they work.

It was the broadest such exercise in terms of representation across government agencies and industrial sectors, officials said.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, addressing the participants at the end of the exercise, predicted cyberattacks will become a routine warfare tactic to degrade command systems before a traditional attack. That is in addition to threats posed by criminal or terrorist attackers.

International law and military doctrines need to be updated to deal with computer attacks, Chertoff said.

"We know that if someone shoots missiles at us, they're going to get a certain kind of response. What happens if it comes over the Internet?," he said.

Chertoff and Gerencser expressed caution over suggestions earlier this month calling for the appointment of a White House "cybersecurity czar" to oversee efforts. But Ruppersberger disagreed. One person was needed to take charge of efforts and to secure the president's ear, he said.

Ruppersberger said people close to president-elect Barack Obama's transition team have convinced him that Obama understands the importance of bolstering cybersecurity.

China Defends Right to Block Web Site Access

A spokesman for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs defended government censorship efforts that block access to some foreign Web sites, saying they had broken Chinese laws by promoting the idea that "two Chinas" exist.

"I hope these Web sites will exercise self-discipline and not do anything that violates Chinese laws," said Liu Jianchao, a ministry spokesman, according to a transcript (in Chinese) of a Tuesday press conference.

His comments came in response to questions about Chinese access to Web sites like the BBC, Voice of America, and others, being blocked again. Access to many censored Web sites was restored earlier this year, part of a government commitment to not restrict Internet access during the Olympics. That grace period now appears to be over.

Prior to the Olympic games, China frequently blocked access to Web sites that it deems objectionable. The government rarely discusses these efforts, or provides information about why the Web sites are blocked.

Liu's comments suggest the reasons are largely political.

His reference to "two Chinas" means Taiwan and China. China regards

Taiwan as a renegade province, although the current Chinese government has never ruled the island. Taiwan is ruled by the Nationalist Party, which retreated to Taiwan in 1949 after losing the Chinese civil war to the Communists. The two sides have been locked in a military and political stalemate since that time.

Taiwan's political status remains a sensitive issue in China, and the government frequently speaks out against any politician or political statement that it believes supports the cause of Taiwanese independence, forbidden by China's anti-secession law.

Liu did not name the foreign Web sites that had allegedly fallen afoul of Chinese censors, but he defended China's right to manage Internet access according to its own laws.

Mass Internet Outages in Egypt after Cables Cut

Egypt's communications ministry says Internet cables in the Mediterranean Sea have been cut, causing massive Internet outages.

The ministry says three Internet cables running through the Mediterranean were cut Friday morning. Throughout the country the Internet is almost completely down or working sporadically.

The ministry says it will take "several days" for cables to be repaired and is trying to switch Egypt's Internet to an alternative route.

It is the second large-scale Internet outage in Egypt this year. Undersea cables were also damaged in January, causing outages in the Mideast and India.

Yemen and Sudan were also having phone and Internet difficulties Friday, but it was unclear if it was connected to the outage.

Apple Releases Mac OS X 10.5.6

MobileMe syncing improvements and security fixes headline the list of changes unveiled with the release of Apple's Mac OS X 10.5.6 update Monday.

The file should be appearing in the Software Update window at any moment now, depending on how often you've set Software Update to check for new software. The sixth update to Leopard, originally released in October 2007, comes with the usual range of tweaks, bug fixes, and security improvements.

One update of note concerns MobileMe, which is now capable of pushing updates made to calendars or contact information from the Web or an iPhone to the primary Mac within a minute. Apple had numerous problems with the launch of the MobileMe service earlier this year, and the latest update should help fix one of the more pressing issues still outstanding with the $99-a-year service.

No Jobs Means No Macworld Splash

Without Steve Jobs attending this year's Macworld keynote, it's safe to say Apple won't be making a huge splash in January.

Before Tuesday's announcement that Jobs would skip the annual Macworld keynote, the usual rumor mill was in full swing, with speculation about Apple Netbooks, iPhone Nanos, and the like. The news that Phil Schiller, senior vice president of worldwide marketing, will be giving the keynote (the Philnote?) brought all that speculation to a halt.

Apple made it pretty clear yesterday that it is not expecting this Macworld to pack a punch. "It doesn't make sense for us to make a major investment in a trade show we will no longer be attending," Apple spokesman Steve Dowling said. As such, that means Apple is not likely to spend the time and effort required to put on one of Jobs' patented addresses, with the elaborate demonstrations and Keynote presentations that accompany such an address.

So what might we expect? New Mac Minis and an upgraded iMac are possible, given the length of time since new models were introduced and a few early reports. And a safe bet is a 30-minute demonstration of the capabilities of Mac OS X Snow Leopard, which is expected to appear in the first quarter of the year.

But do not expect anything groundbreaking to emerge from this year's Macworld, which, truth be told, was probably going to be the case, no matter who gave the keynote. Jobs' absence merely confirms that Apple is mailing in this Macworld, the last in which the company plans to participate.

One potential surprise would be Jobs making any kind of appearance. The announcement immediately set off speculation about his health, though nothing has emerged over the last 24 hours to suggest that it has taken a turn for the worse.

Apple could get a lot of mileage out of having Jobs swap roles with Schiller, playing the goofy capable-assistant role usually reserved for Schiller. And it would allow the Mac-faithful to serenade Jobs one last time; while many people come to Macworld for the products and the community, an awful lot of people come for no other reason than to see Jobs speak.

Even if Jobs just sat in the front row, as executives such as COO Tim Cook and various members of the board of the directors do during a typical Stevenote, it would go a long way toward reassuring the Mac community and Apple shareholders that Steve is fine. Apple's stock is down almost 7 percent Wednesday, following yesterday's news, as investors ponder the impact of a January without Jobs.

Yahoo Revamps E-mail To Become More Social

Yahoo Inc. has finally started to roll out new features designed to make its e-mail service more like the popular online hangouts Facebook and MySpace, following through on a promise made nearly a year ago.

With the additions announced Monday, Yahoo’s roughly 275 million e-mail users will have the option of setting up their accounts so they can highlight communications from other people with whom they have formed an online connection.

The concept mirrors a premise that has turned privately held Facebook and News Corp.’s MySpace into two of the Web’s hot spots for socializing over the past three years - a period that has coincided with a wrenching downturn at Yahoo.

After registering their profiles on Facebook and MySpace, people can use the sites to form online bonds with their friends and family so they can share personal information and keep track of each other’s activities.

Yahoo also is copying Facebook and MySpace by opening its e-mail service to applications created by outside programmers. In a test that started Monday among a small number of e-mail users, Yahoo began offering applications developed for finding photos stored in their mailboxes, transferring information to blogs and sharing tips about movies.

The changes will turn Yahoo’s e-mail service into a "scrapbook for your life," said John Kremer, a company vice president. "We hope opening up Yahoo mail will have a game-changing influence on the industry."

Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang offered the first glimpse at the Sunnyvale-based company’s broader e-mail ambitions during a presentation at a consumer electronics show held in January.

Introducing the changes took time because Yahoo wanted to ensure it got the technology right and hoped to minimize disruption for users, said Ash Patel, who heads up the company’s products. "We are very deliberate in the way we roll things out," he said.

The e-mail overhaul took so long to complete that Yang is now on the way out as Yahoo’s chief executive. With Yahoo’s stock price and earnings eroding under his leadership, Yang plans to step down as soon as a new CEO is found.

Besides tweaking its e-mail service, Yahoo plans to upgrade its toolbar for Web browsers. The improvements include the ability to check new messages coming into Yahoo e-mail and competing services as well as to receive notifications about their online connections’ latest activities.

As it introduces new twists to its Web site, Yahoo also is planning to phase out less popular services as part of an effort to reduce its annual expenses by $400 million. Yahoo is reaping most of the savings by laying off 1,500 workers in a purge that began last week.

Patel on Monday declined to discuss which services Yahoo will eliminate, saying more information will be passed on next year.

About 90 Percent of All Email Is Spam

Armies of hijacked computers are flooding the world with spam as hackers devise slicker ways to take over unwitting people’s machines, according to a Cisco report.

Virus-infected computers are woven into "botnets" used to attack more machines and to send specious sales pitches to email addresses in low-cost quests to bilk readers out of cash.

"Every year we see threats evolve as criminals discover new ways to exploit people, networks and the Internet," said Cisco chief security researcher Patrick Peterson.

Junk email referred to as spam accounts for nearly 200 billion messages daily, approximately 90 percent of email worldwide, according to a Cisco Annual Security Report.

The United States is the biggest source of spam, accounting for 17.2 percent of the messages. Turkey and Russia ranked second and third, accounting for 9.2 percent and 8 percent of spam respectively, according to Cisco.

This year, botnets were used to inject an array of legitimate Websites with an IFrames malicious code that reroutes visitors to websites that download computer viruses into their machines, according to Cisco.

"The botnet is, in many cases, ground-zero for online criminal threats," Peterson said.

"Using malware to infect someone’s computers is an incredibly common mechanism and harnessing them all together is a way they do their click fraud, spam emails, and data stealing."

As computer security vendors such as Cisco get better at protecting machines from hackers and users grow wary of clicking on unsolicited Web links or email attachments, online criminals are turning botnets on Web-based email accounts.

Hackers are "reputation hijacking" by using botnets to figure out weak passwords protecting Web-based email accounts, according to Peterson.

Weak passwords consist of family names, birthdays, home addresses, or other terms considered relatively easy to deduce.

Once access is gained to legitimate email accounts, a plethora of spam messages sent are sent in the owners’ names.

Personalized Spam Rising Sharply

Yes, guys, those spam e-mails for Viagra or baldness cream just might be directed to you personally. So, too, are many of the other crafty come-ons clogging inboxes, trying to lure us to fake Web sites so criminals can steal our personal information.

A new study by Cisco Systems Inc. found an alarming increase in the amount of personalized spam, which online identity thieves create using stolen lists of e-mail addresses or other poached data about their victims, such as where they went to school or which bank they use.

Unlike traditional spam, most of which is blocked by e-mail filters, personalized spam, known as "spear phishing" messages, often sail

through unmolested. They're sent in smaller chunks, and often come from accounts the criminals have set up at reputable Web-based e-mail services. Some of the messages are expertly crafted, linking to beautifully designed Web sites that are bogus or immediately install malicious programs.

Cisco's annual security study found that spam is growing quickly - nearly 200 billion spam messages are now sent each day, double the volume in 2007 - and that targeted attacks are also rising sharply.

More than 0.4 percent of all spam sent in September were targeted attacks, Cisco found. That might sound low, but since 90 percent of all e-mails sent worldwide are spam, this means 800 million messages a day are attempts are spear phishing. A year ago, targeted attacks with personalized messages were less than 0.1 percent of all spam.

The latest attacks include text-message spam, e-mails trying to trick business owners into coughing up credentials for their Google advertising accounts, or personalized "whaling" e-mails to executives claiming that their businesses are under investigation by the FBI or that there's a problem with their personal bank account.

As the world's largest maker of networking gear, Cisco is in a unique position to study the traffic flowing through its customers' networks, which include the biggest Internet providers and corporations. The latest study was based in part on the company's ability to monitor 30 percent of all Web and e-mail traffic through its hardware and software and a network of companies that contribute data.

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